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UNCLAS KUWAIT 001329

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARP, NEA/PD QUINN AND SMITH
TEL AVIV FOR LEBARON, RIYADH FOR TUELLER

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: KUWAITI REACTIONS TO THE NOMINATION OF RICHARD
LEBARON AS AMBASSADOR TO KUWAIT

(U) SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED--PROTECT ACCORDINGLY

1. (U) SUMMARY: Kuwaiti media have prominently reported Islamist opposition to the nomination of Richard LeBaron as ambassador to Kuwait in the past few days, with a handful of Islamist MPs, members of the Kuwait University student union and other fellow travelers expressing dismay that "personalities that have served in the Zionist entity" have been accepted by the GOK. While an Islamist demonstration yesterday against US policies in Palestine and Iraq attracted a significant cross-section of Sunni and Shia'a activists who repeated their opposition to the LeBaron nomination, it is clear to us from comments by senior government officials and from conversations with contacts that opposition to LeBaron is not significant or deep, and that GOK acceptance of his nomination will not be withdrawn. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) The Rantissi assassination has provided local Islamists with their best ammunition against Israel in some time, and they are trying, to the limited extent they can, to use the nomination of Tel Aviv DCM Richard LeBaron as Ambassador to Kuwait to embarrass the GOK. There has been some public criticism, including a demonstration by local Islamists, with local media reporting that both members of the Islamic Constitutional Movement (Muslim Brotherhood) "bloc" in the National Assembly had joined together with their more radical Salafi colleagues to block GOK agreement for LeBaron. "We do not accept those who beat the drums for the killing of Palestinians by Sharon to be ambassadors in Kuwait. The United States should choose a person who is accepted by the people first, before the government," intoned independent Islamist MP Dhaifallah Buramiya. The ICM issued a statement that characterized the appointment as exhibiting "remarkable ignorance and insensitivity to Muslims."

3. (U) Such comments have been met with derision by the editor-in-chief of Arabic daily Al Watan (whose paper often provides a forum for Islamist commentary), who writes that "with the advent of summer, there seems to be a rise in the number of people suffering from delirium," and says that by Islamist logic Kuwait should boycott the Palestinians for negotiating at Oslo. Another commentator asserts that he "wasn't much impressed" by photos of Kuwaiti students protesting the American presence in Iraq criticizing the LeBaron appointment, saying that the demonstration was clearly contrived by Islamists for political gain.

4. (SBU) In private conversations with Emboffs, Kuwaiti editors and others have suggested that ostensible reaction to the LeBaron appointment also reflects tensions between Islamists and the government of PM Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah, already simmering from a recent government decision to merge the Sharia College into the College of Law, and from a decision by the Ministry of Information to host an installment of the popular TV show "Star Academy" (an Arabic version of "American Idol") which Islamists see as sinful. Islamists, these contacts have told us, have been shaken by the fact that an overwhelming percentage of the Kuwaiti public has ignored religious fatwas to boycott the show, and that a staggering twenty thousand Kuwaitis reportedly turned out to welcome the Kuwaiti participant back home. Islamists have also been stung by op/eds mocking their fatwas (one recent cartoon showed the Kuwait public crucified on a cross of religious prohibitions.) "The Islamists are losing the battle for public opinion," said one senior editor, who remarked that a local cooperative association recently voted out its Islamist board members in favor of liberals (such associations have been traditional bastions of Islamist influence in Kuwait.) "Five years ago I would have told you they represented a threat to the country, but no more."

5. (SBU) Comment: A senior advisor to Kuwait's PM told us that the flap over the LeBaron nomination is just "expected empty talk" and should be viewed as such. The GOK has no intention of revisiting the issue, and we think the Islamist rhetoric on the issue reflects opportunistic local politics rather than any significant opposition to the appointment. We will report any further commentary on this subject as appropriate.

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